

Trenton Youth Community-Based Research Corps

*By Beth Paul, TCNJ Associate Professor of Psychology
and Jenny Orten, Bonner Foundation Consultant*

Purpose

- Assists students in conducting community-based research grounded in close working relationships with community leaders.
- Provides community organizations with research results and engages them in authentic partnership with the College.

Background

One of the first partnerships forged to work on community-based research was between the College of New Jersey (TCNJ) and the Trenton Youth Services Commission. They were connected through the Trenton Center for Campus-Community Partnerships—an organization designed to encourage collaboration and cooperation between local campuses and the Trenton community. TCNJ professor Beth Paul met with the Trenton Center through the summer and fall semester of 2001 to discern the group's goals, uncover available resources, conduct background research, and draft a survey. In October, AmeriCorps Bonner Leader positions became available at The College of New Jersey and recruitment began.

How It Works

Compensation

Bonner Leaders perform 300 hours of service to become eligible for part-time AmeriCorps education awards at the completion of their service. In addition, AmeriCorps provides each student with stipend of \$1641 and the college awards each student six independent study/internship academic credits.

Student Teams and Meetings

Groups of three to five students work together, leveraging their potential and skills to accomplish more than they could individually. During the semester, corps meetings for the Bonner Leaders are held weekly for reflection, discussion, and debriefing. CBR corps members meet an additional time during the week with Dr. Paul and their community partners. The close collaboration with community partners is an ideological choice as well as a necessity due to the aims of the project.

Pre-Project Training

An intensive training is held before the program begins because of the short time available to complete the project. In 2002 there was a 90-hour, three-week January training before the beginning of the semester. During the January training, students got a head start on their service hours and received training in Microsoft Access, listening skills, and other areas. They also worked on team-building and outlining the academic components of the project. They collaborated with community partners in Trenton and learned about the current issues and historical background of the city. They learned how to strategize with community partners to develop a work plan for their particular projects. In 2003 students were required to take a semester-long course in the spring to prepare for their research in the fall.

Working with Community Partners

Because the Bonner Leaders and the faculty work hand-in-hand with community partners, these agencies must take time to build trusting relationships, deal with interpersonal difficulties up front, and consider their own stereotypes and prejudices. Procedural details and expectations are also outlined at

the outset in writing, including publishing and editing rights, ethical issues, and confidentiality.

2002 Community-Based Research Project

This year one of the two research projects studied the availability of non-school-hour programming for children and youth in Trenton, NJ. The Trenton Youth Community-based Research Corps at The College of New Jersey collaborated with the Trenton Youth Services Commission (TYSC) to conduct community-based research. The TYSC, supported by the mayor's office, comprises volunteer representatives from over 40 agencies that serve children. Dr. Paul offered her consulting services to the organization, and three Bonner Leaders provided the workforce necessary to undertake the surveying process.

Using survey instruments and geographical information systems data, the Bonner Leaders created two linking databases: one of all organizations offering non-school-hour programming and the other of all individual programs offered by those organizations. Then they phoned organizations, identified contact names, and sent written surveys. Follow-up was needed for each completed survey, and students secured a 50 percent return rate, a high percentage for a community survey. They made numerous site visits and logged over 1,500 phone calls.

Bonner Leaders found that few programs offered transportation and that one neighborhood in particular was severely underserved. In May and June the three Bonner Leaders prepared and delivered their final report for the commission outlining the findings of their research. The commission used the findings of this report to seek funding for new programs in targeted areas.

What Makes The Project Unique

In many Bonner Leader programs, students perform direct service in their first year and gradually contribute to their programs as advocates and researchers. In this corps, students begin their service work by conducting community-based research grounded in close working relationships with community leaders and numerous site visits.

Other Benefits

To Students

Bonner Leaders are empowered as equal partners with faculty and community agencies. They report that they have never felt such respect from or for faculty members. They have the opportunity to negotiate various roles of being student, worker, and honoree at the same time. They have the opportunity to be both autonomous and accountable as they conduct research on real community concerns. Students work with a diverse group of people to solve problems and accomplish shared goals. They learn adaptability in communication by talking to executive directors, janitors, ministers, parents, staff, and others in nonthreatening, productive, respectful ways.

Community-based research is a powerful learning experience for students who spend a great deal of time asking why their study is important to children and youth in Trenton. Simultaneously, in other courses, some students are also conducting research in a neuroscience lab; this community-based research expands their idea of what constitutes good research and good methods.

To Faculty

Faculty members involved in this project get a great deal of satisfaction from the applied value of the research to the commission and to children and youth in Trenton. They have the opportunity to form close mentoring relationships with students, which are not typically possible when teaching 100 students each semester. These relationships can be deeper in community-based research because the whole student is involved in a more personal way.

To the Community

Community partners receive valuable research results. Commission members engage in the process in partnership with the College, taking pride in the innovative nature of their work, writing conference proposals, and feeling empowered by the positive attention they receive in the community. Community partners see themselves as teachers, mentors, and collaborators with students, faculty, and the College itself. Partners now recognize that the College is a resource for them, for meeting space, for the

individuals they serve, and for other avenues of research.

Timeline

Spring Semester

Students enroll in a course entitled “Downtown” to learn about issues of and services available for inner-city youth and families through exposure to many nonprofit social service agencies.

Fall Semester

Students begin community-based research projects, working in teams of three or four in collaboration with nonprofit agencies.

Spring Semester

Students continue to conduct community-based research projects, completing them by May, producing a professional written report and making a presentation in the community.

Resources And Partners

Bonner Foundation

- Provides connections to Bonner schools across the country, and networking and training opportunities with other New Jersey Bonner programs.

Trenton Center for Campus-Community Partnerships

- Provides encouragement, contacts, resources, and troubleshooting assistance.

Community Agencies

- Partner with the college in conducting research and educating undergraduates in urban youth issues, social service provision, and advocacy.

AmeriCorps

- Provides monetary support in the form of academic awards and stipends for the Bonner Leaders.

The College of New Jersey Psychology Department

- Provides use of computers and office space to store materials, hold meetings, make phone calls, and work collaboratively.

Overcoming Challenges

This program has expanded from a five-month to a three-semester long program. Students need grounding in inner-city youth issues, social service provision, and advocacy before entering into an intensive community-based research collaboration. These collaborations benefit from a yearlong association, producing a rigorous and professional product for the agency and allowing a rich partnership to develop.

Student support for “between-semester” activity is still lacking. Sometimes students need on-campus housing and their transportation needs may change.

Evidence of Success

Students marvel at their increased understanding of the complexity of urban youth issues and the challenges and possibilities of social service provision and advocacy. As the partnership progresses, students grow into being a “full partner” taking equal responsibility as faculty and community participants. Community agencies have gained research skills as well as research products that help them to refine agency services, develop new services, and leverage new funding resources.

How to Make it Grow

CBR projects are time-consuming, and they need to be considered along with other forms of research and publishing when teaching loads are assigned each semester. Faculty members leading the project

should have their course loads reduced. If this is not possible, faculty members will be able, one hopes, to situate CBR within traditional course structures, although this can be difficult due to the scope of most projects. Faculty members might also link their professional interests to community-based research if their concerns are shared by community partners.

The hope is that the College will be able to combine direct service with community-based research. Surveyed agencies often asked Bonner Leaders for support from student volunteers. Community-based research is not the best model for building a campus service movement, as a limited number of students typically do specialized non-direct service work. Direct service combined with community-based research meets both community requests and student developmental needs.